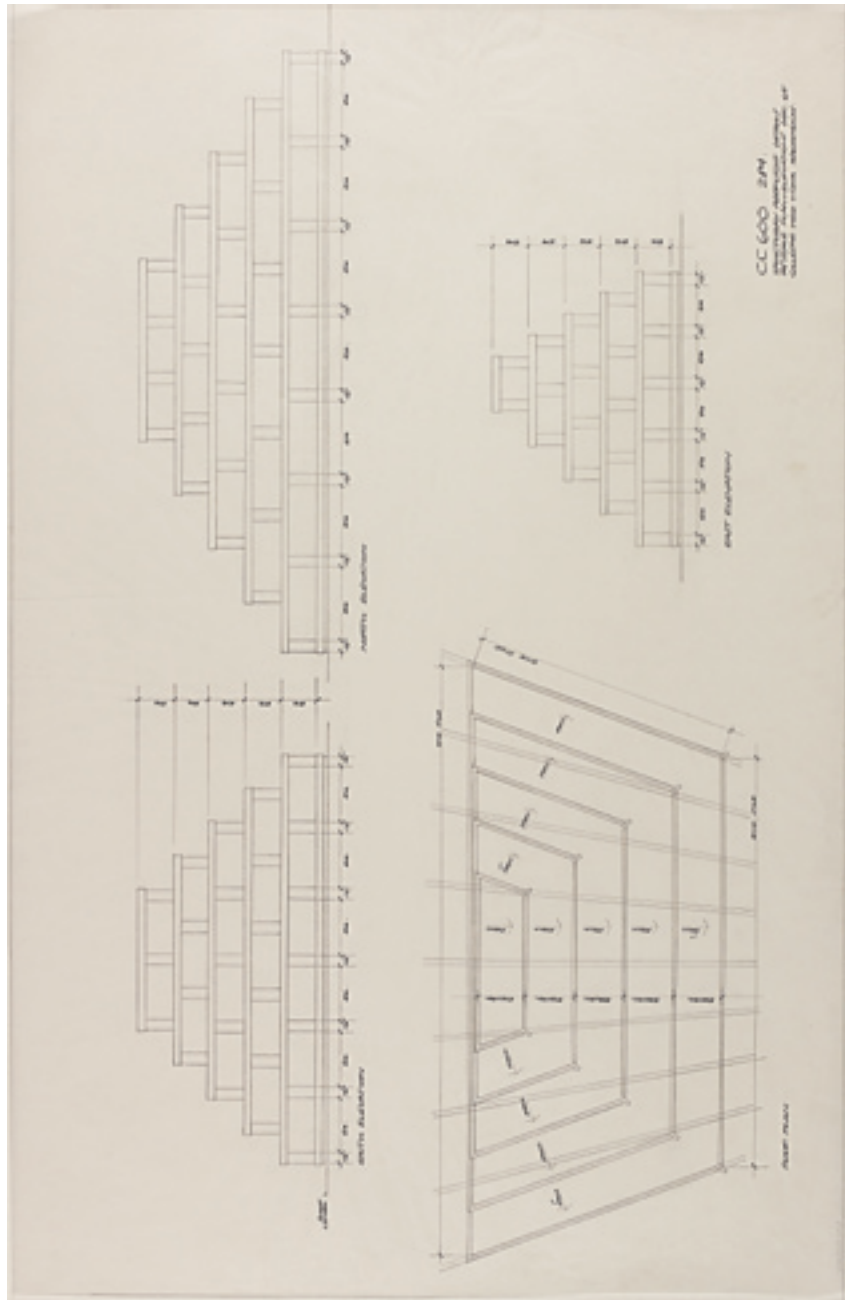


**IBID**

**ALEC SHEPLEY**



IBID  
ALEC SHEPLEY



## THE LIGHTNESS OF THOUGHT AND THE WEIGHT OF OBJECTS

“I am from Leonia” announces the voice, at the same moment at which (mirroring what is being said) white text appears across the screen, running from left to right, drawing my eyes to traverse as first an ‘I’ then an ‘a’ then a ‘m’ delineates the sentence that is also appearing as a phrase in my mind at the same time “I am from Leonia”. The combined effect of audio arising, alongside typographic appearance, places this utterance within a mental space which queries its origins. It seems to ask me ‘is the voice a product of the text? Or is the text a record of a voice?’ This binary dynamic is established at the beginning of Alec Shepley’s video *‘I am Leonia’* and is central to the work’s structure. The text disappears and the voice continues, allowing my question to reverberate for me about the origins of the voice. The screen depicts the inside of a modernist ruin, St Peters Seminary in Cardross, Scotland to be precise, clearly identifiable through its cast and molded concrete pierced by the outside light and foliage. The horizon demarks and splits the screen in half. Entering from the right a sweeping brush first, and then next a figure move along this indeterminate line and circle around to double back, all the while slowly accruing and moving dust and detritus to a point located approximately center stage. It occurs to me that this path taken by the lone figure with a sweeping brush is opposite to the direction at which the text appeared and announced the beginning of the video. As a filmic device entering from the right and moving to the left, acts as a disjuncture that arrests my comfortable viewing.

As an artwork *‘I am from Leonia’* is filled with futility. There seems little tangible attempt to actually cleanse the space in any demonstrable sense. This feeling is enhanced when in one sequence the figure’s attention is centered upon sweeping along a shadow cast by the ruin’s distinctive vaulted ceilings. What could be filled with more purposeful purposelessness than following a contour whose only certainty is that it will have shifted as soon as one has completed the activity of following along its path? This unassailable quality is further testified to when the figure diligently sweeps along the edge of what would have been a balcony seemingly oblivious to the genuine detritus, which constitutes the floor below. Neither is the sweeping piecemeal in the way that it might be conducted if one was passing time within monotonous employment. The sweep-

ing is carried through with diligence and attentiveness to the job at hand that seems at odds with the apparent situation at hand. The intersections between the opposite forces that is apparent within '*Leonia*' activates a potential for meaning to be created by a viewer through a continuous process of purpose forming which is initiated and then refuted, and discarded.

Watching *Leonia* I cannot help but think of American artist Douglas Huebler's famous assertion from 1968 when he states, "The world is full of objects more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more". The protagonist within the video is intent on moving and remodeling matter rather than making a new construction or order. Shepley's video presents itself as a tension. What is the nature of this sweeping? What is its purpose? The action is carried out and performed with a sensitivity removed from simple cleaning (what indeed could be cleaned?). The figure seems to be part archeologist unsure of the status of what is being dislodged, moved and uncovered. There is equal reverie being given to dust and dirt as there is to surface. I think about cleaning and the points at which cleaning occurs; after a party, after a meal, before and after visitors. All moments similar to these are epiphanies within our lives when compared next to the act of removing and discarding after the event. I wonder if cleaning is ever the event, or is it resigned to be the melancholy moment after the fact. Cleaning, sweeping in this instance, is the quintessential point to reminisce and a point not to be in the present. Is there virtue in seeing all things, and all activities, outside of a hierarchy and as being equal? In a likewise manner artworks exude and pronounce themselves as events and pre-eminence is given to the arrival at this state via the popularity of the phrase 'installation' within our lexicon of contemporary art practice. *Leonia*, in its residual dwelling on what has long passed and is out of place, makes me wonder how little contemporary art thinks of *de-installing*, the act of removing an artwork from a situation or event. Perhaps de-installing lies too far beyond the commodity address?

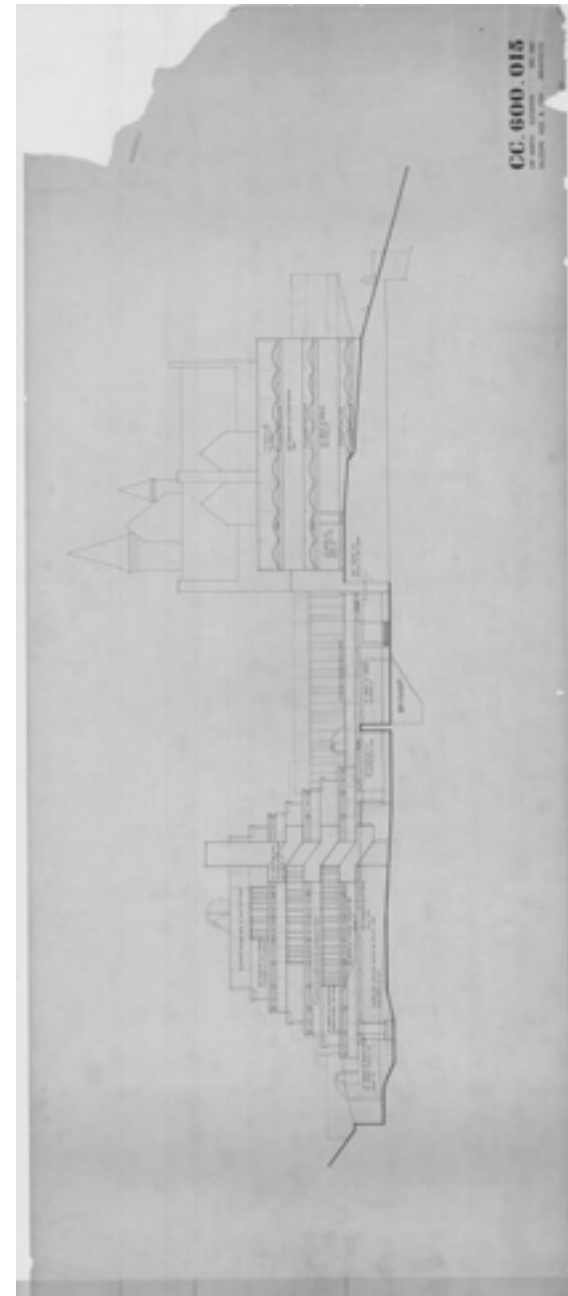
Concentrating upon the site of this modern ruin I am struck by how indeterminate it seems. Is this the fate of modernist buildings of this nature that fall into emptiness and disrepair? Unsure of their own status, the building's vice is to exist in perpetuity as both forgotten relic, and abandoned beginning. Alec Shepley's '*Leonia*' testifies to this curious status and in turn one can watch the video thinking that the building is new or under construction, the sweeper preparing the ground for further work, and yet at the same time it is apparent that this is a wreck and very

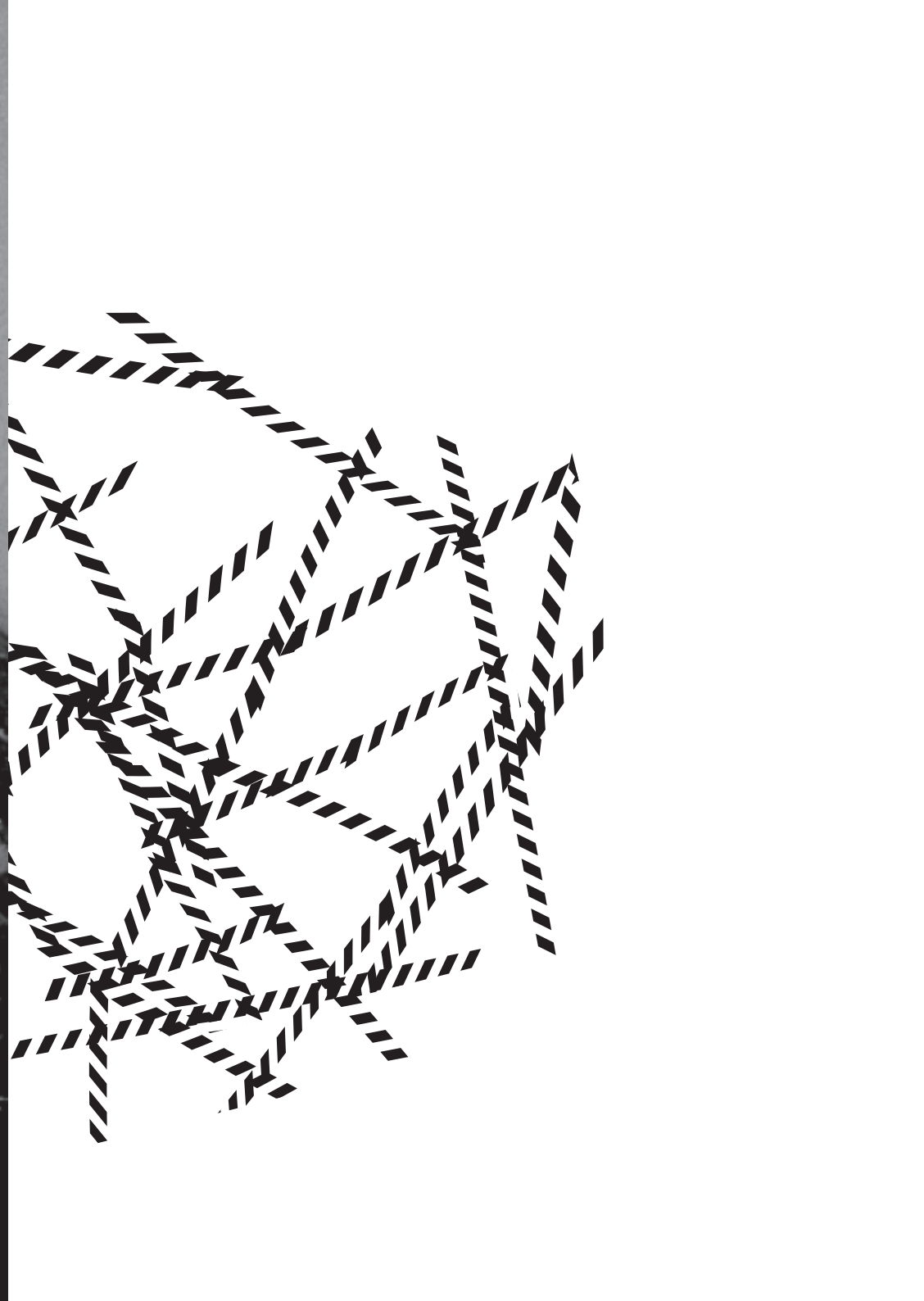
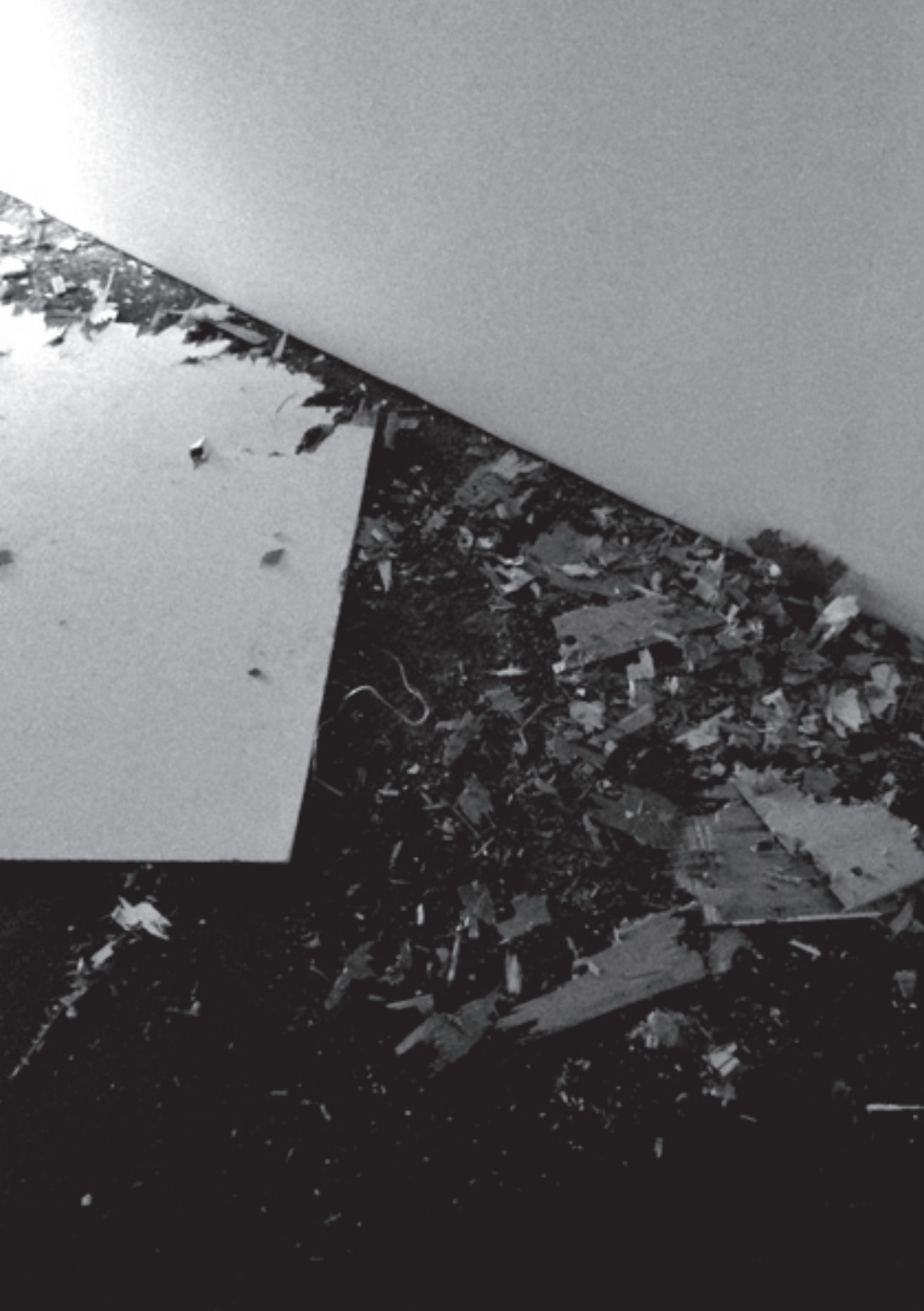


much a former glory. The consistency and sensitivity of the sweeper, as he attests to his strange occupation, occludes singular readings and provides meaning in multiple positions.

'*I am from Leonia...*' enters my mind again and I look again at the text where the body of the narrative is taken. Italo Calvino's last section of Chapter 7 from *Invisible Cities* does not begin with the authorial phrase 'I am from Leonia' but the remainder of the dialogue is congruent with the 1974 original. *Invisible Cities* is famously a book narrating different facets of one city, Venice. Leonia is a city obsessed with newness and replenishment. Shepley's '*Leonia*' is a meditation on matter out of place. The performative 'I' introduces a speaker, a listener, and a place, and the work's structure allows me to place myself in a variety of roles. "*I am from Leonia*" I say to myself as I consider the weight of objects introduced to the world, in comparison to the lightness of thoughts that lie at their origin.

DEAN HUGHES,  
DECEMBER 2014









## IBID – ALEC SHEPLEY

*“Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars. “There is the blueprint,” they say.”*

(From *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino)

### AN IMPOSSIBLE BLUEPRINT

According to Daniel Kunitz (2011) the lesson of the earlier efforts in 1960s where art challenged context, is that if you want to disrupt the understanding of what art is you need to alter how it gets to its audience. He quoted the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers who wrote:

*“The definition of artistic activity occurs, first of all, in the field of distribution”*

(Crow, 1996 p.177).

On the other hand art that leaves its place of making is prone to endless manipulation, interpretations and vested interests (Buren, 1970; Krauss, 1989). In bringing the viewer into close proximity of art in its own closest reality I encounter fragmentation and art’s paradoxical inability to render life – indeed I have discovered disclosing this gap through a kind of purposeful purposelessness can lead to endless possibility!

I find myself contemplating the notion of fragmentation *as* a practice – as a trope of reflexivity - speculating on the insistence of a procedure that uncovers the spaces of potential and allows voice through what has now become a much more dispersed or feral occupation. True, I still have a studio equipped with all the usual apparatus found in an artist’s place of making – a table, a chair, but now through an intertwining of reality and fiction I produce or simply inhabit improvised sites that are dialectically linked replies to one another.

Schematic works made by grouping together a highly selective range of media and materials including text and video, found and made objects, sound and lighting, painting, photography and stagecraft, I invite the viewer to walk the site, to *get inside* the work and reflect on the possibility of new and meaningful representation(s).

In this new work *Ibid*, created for the Power 2014 show at Kuandu Museum of Fine Art, Taipei, and as part of my on-going residency at X-Church, Gainsborough in the UK, I am referencing the idea of previous artworks and sites as texts and quoting them in the viewing space. I am also alluding to the artist as a traveller within these texts (works), drawing the viewer in and inviting them on an existential journey – a journey through imagined sites of the fragment such as those witnessed by readers of *Invisible Cities*. The elements of the installations are discursive spaces, linked and alert to architecture and site as metaphors for our mental states – they all refer to a place of (our) making and unmaking, both real and imagined.

The elements of the installation position the viewer within a fragmented and incomplete project where tensions between the meaningful and the meaningless, between creativity and fall, fiction and reality are all met. It is perhaps within our nature to shy away from such an unfinished work, or even feel robbed or affronted in some way, especially when encountered in a gallery or museum space – it can after all be rather disconcerting to feel as though there is something missing - not quite there, or that the artist has simply abandoned ship.

In this work however, an attempt is made to disclose that the ‘right place’ for art is within this unresolvable state and put into reverse the negative stereotypes of the unfinished or the abandoned project - to invert such imagery and create the potential for a more positive metaphor.

In this work the viewer is immersed in a set of visual relationships that subconsciously he or she is aware of, to create allegories, new meanings and to foreground the creative potential of the fragment in a process of renewal and redefinition. Through the unfinished - the impossibility of art (the gap between the real and represented) and yet the possibility of art, is made apparent through the disclosure of this gap, loss or lack - through a kind of removal of myself. After all, the artist reveals gaps and doesn’t fill them in (Ross, 2006).

*Ibid* as a provisional site of models, texts, and broken forms, and the viewer’s experience of (my) making unmaking, aims to open up this speculation on the notion of a work’s becoming and the hope that we can create for ourselves new narratives of possibility.

The elements within the show combine to reference unstable and subjective concepts of space and understanding, and tempt the viewer around seemingly unstructured activities and makeshift actions which ultimately draw attention to the unresolved poetics of the everyday and the indefinable beauty in the ordinary - particularly through such works as ‘I am from Leonia’, made during my X-Church residency, especially for the *Ibid* project.

This new video piece is influenced by Calvino’s book *Invisible Cities*, and in particular the sections about the cities of Leonia and Sophronia. In this short film played back continuously in the space, the viewer witnesses my steady and progressive sweeping of what was once a super-modern interior but which is now an abandoned and ruined husk. This repetitive would appear to have no end in sight. In fact it all seems to be a somewhat Sisyphean attempt to fulfil the impossible blueprint referred to by the inhabitants of *Invisible Cities*.

The voice-over in the film recalls the street cleaners who are welcomed like angels to the city, and who ‘engage in their task of removing the residue of yesterday’s existence in a respectfully silent ritual that inspires devotion’. This is perhaps because once things have been discarded nobody really wants to have to think about them anymore:

“Nobody wonders where, each day, they carry their load of refuse. Outside the city, surely; but each year the city expands, and the street cleaners have to fall farther back. The bulk of the outflow increases and the piles rise higher, become stratified, extend over a wider perimeter. Besides, the more Leonia’s talent for making new materials excels, the more the rubbish improves in quality, resists time, the elements, fermentations, combustions. A fortress of indestructible leftovers surrounds Leonia, dominating it on every side, like a chain of mountains.”

In the book, as in this show, the reader is compelled to reflect on the ultimate outcomes of such accumulations of the debris as an outcome of daily progress and thus question a wider logic around production and unbridled modernity.

This question about what to do with our worldly possessions, once we no longer have a use for them, is as poignant today as it ever was and *Ibid* is an attempt to pause, visualize and reflect on the status of the fragment within an embodied relationship with the world.

I often work in neglected urban spaces as the creative energy found in such settings offers a useful metaphor for our state of being. Working with fragments and ruins such as in the video piece *I am from Leonia* (2014) provides the marginal spaces I need for dispersing ideas – ones that do not stand for anything certain but that are renegotiating a relationship with audience – you the viewer/reader – and testing out whether a work could be perhaps not “of art”, as Duchamp once asked (1913). Through enacting what has become a nomadic studio in neglected urban spaces the work attempts to recognise and meet with a particular human condition and negotiate a transient and momentary aesthetic of regular experience.

However, through the unfinished *I am* also disclosing ambivalence – what is missing or not being seen – a disappearance if you like. I feel as though I am occupying the role of the wandering performer but unseen by any public – as Christine Ross so eloquently wrote, through ambivalence indifference is deployed as a condition of possibility. In other words, possibility is revealed by disclosure of ambivalence – what is missing or not ‘being seen’. In a world where an apathetic public seems disinterested in truths and only spectacle, I am trying to disclose the creative potential of the fragment to restore our connection with the world.

*ALEC SHEPLEY*

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## IMAGES

- p. 26, 27, 28, *I am from Leonia* (# 3) 2014,  
6 minute film (wall projection)
- p. 27–28. *I am from Leonia* (# 5 & 7) 2014,  
(two tableaux with chair, table, debris and monitors)
- p. 23–25, 29  
30, 31 *Untitled* (Tableau) 2014,  
(broken wall, three paintings, debris, fluorescent light)
- p. 14, 20, 21 *I am from Sophronia* 2014,  
(suspended model island, building and trees)
- p.27 *Untitled* 2014,  
(photographic documentation from site visit to St Peters  
Seminary, Cardross, Argyll, Scotland)

## ALEC SHEPLEY & DEAN HUGHES

Alec Shepley is an artist and currently Senior Academic in Fine Arts at the University of Lincoln, UK. Born in 1963 Manchester, England, he studied his Bachelor's degree at Wolverhampton School of Art (1986), his MA at Sheffield Hallam University (1993) and his PhD at Manchester Metropolitan University (2000). He has exhibited widely in the UK and internationally in China, India, Canada, Poland and the US and contributed to the development of Artistic Research nationally and internationally. His work focuses on the 'work' of art, situation and notions of the unfinished. He is concerned not to just make art about art, but to empower the viewer to conjoin an aesthetic of regular experience to other encounters in wider fields of action.

Dean Hughes is an artist and currently Head of School of Art, Edinburgh College of Art. Born in 1974 in Salford, England he studied at Chelsea College of Art and Design between 1993-96, where he was taught by British artists Roger Ackling and Martin Creed. His work doesn't begin with materials but with objects that are perfunctory and overlooked. He has exhibited work in exhibitions such as British Art Show 5 organized by the Hayward Gallery in 2000 and most recently he was included in Newspeak-British Art Now at the Saatchi Gallery, London (2011). He has exhibited widely in London and the UK and internationally in Milan and San Francisco and he is represented by Maria Stenfors Gallery, London.

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